Narrative and architecture

"There is no design in silence. All designers, like all designed objects tell stories, sometimes deliberately, many other times without much degree of consciousness. Design is permeated with narratives because it is constituted within a field of discourses: formal, psychological, ideological, theoretical."  

1 - Luis Porter & Sergio Sotelo

Architecture is not as pure as art, poetry or a painting. A poet can decide what he wants to write without anyone asking him to justify. A painter can select his own canvas and colours but an architect doesn't necessarily have the liberty to do the same. Here the end product is usually a habitable space which needs to be justified in all aspects. Yet, there is something tremendously creative about the process of design. This process is usually understood and explored with the help of narratives, trying to tell a story or a concept behind the idea. Since early eighties, many architects have used the term "narrative" to describe their work. For architects it's the enduring way of engaging the process and the end product. Besides it reinforces the experimental dimension of architecture over the mere style or an over attempt of technology. In a simplest form it's about conveying the story through various mediums of "What they want to"

The "design world" we live in has two different and dominant opinions. The rationalists claiming a brick is just a brick, a vase is just a vase and the steel and concrete as building materials cannot or should not speak. Whereas, the later one with an intension of adding meaning to design through telling stories and leaving it open for interpretation, just as Louis Kahn said" What do you want brick ? And brick says to you, I like an arch". This surfaces the difference between "design as narrative" and the idea of "narrative design".

As for the writer the words are the components of the assembly, the language of narrative in architecture has more choice that one in terms of expressing the desired. Different mediums beyond the conventional writing practices such as sketches, drawings, collages, films, documentaries, comic strips and built forms themselves have been used and experimented to tell a story. It was for the reason beyond obvious that architects started to publish their work in order to narrate the process, ideology, methods and results through the conventional printed medium. My effort through this paper is to understand and explore the comparatively new or less experimented narrative techniques like making a film or narrating it through spatial experience and expressing the desired through them. To do the same the attempt is to explore and understand different examples of films and spatial experiences as narratives and formal thoughts.

Films as narratives:

Any kind of narrative is essentially a story told or to be. Film as a media and narrative technique efficiently acts a catalyst in addressing the desired. The real essence of both, film and architecture is time. As narratives both have potential of either being just right in, before or ahead of time depending on what they want to convey. Just the way architecture uses materials and colours to convey and complete the space, films have the potential to make you see and realise the stories in more interactive and engaging way. Something you can relate to, experience and understand subjectively. The very nature of film as media to reach and communicate makes it a powerful tool to address and put forth things.
"Spelling Dystopia", a film by Nina Fischer and Maraon el Sani (2009)

Architecture has always defined itself through permanence. The unseen link between film and architecture is time, both are time sensitive mediums. As a medium film has the capability to capture the life cycles of architecture and place, time and space. It can be effectively used to discuss the issues and the memories held within a certain building. With many of Fischer & El Sani’s art projects such as ‘The Rise’, and this very examples of ‘Spelling Dystopia’ which is elaborated further, talks about how memory operates, how a site is related to its history in both physical and metaphoric manner.

Fischer and Sani are interested in how cinema has an impact on locations, how the place is perceived by people and how it relates to their collective memory. With their film "Spelling Dystopia" their work focused on the people's perception of the uninhabited island of Hashima near Nagasaki in Japan which has a vibrant history. The way it was portrayed in the blockbuster science fiction movie released in 2000 named "Battle Royal" it came back to the consciousness of the Japanese and the world with a different perception and people started to relate the to the place mostly through movies and videogames as an abandoned ghost island.

The above images of the island appear almost like a fantasy or an imaginary playground where different imaginative and real layers are merged. The way "Battle Royale" conveyed the place to people, since then it has been taken on a status of mythic and fictionalised shift in the national imagination of Japanese people.

The task of the team through the film was to make clear and bring to notice the real history and the facts of the place to people making sure that it is conveyed in subjective way addressing their collective memory and the fact. Hashima, the island has been an important location and a resource for Japanese as a coal mine until 1974. It is a manmade island with the use of concrete as promising material in the 1916. During the World War II it was a work camp site for war prisoners from Korea and china, later in 60s it became the most dense place on the earth. Having a size of 160 x 450 meters, the island was habited by over 5000 people in its peak time, all being workers and officials of the Mitsubishi coalmine. In 1974 the place was abandoned because Coal as the natural resource was exploited. Today Hashima is uninhabited and the concrete architecture is left to natural erosion. The film "Battle Royale" did change people's perception about the place considering it to be an abandoned ghost island.
Fischer & Sani’s film, ‘Spelling Dystopia’ combines the memories of a former inhabitant of the island - the son of the coal miner, who lived on the island till 1974 and who is leading an organisation today with the aim of preserving the Island as a world heritage site. The narration of the film is combined with the two high school students who talk about the fragments of the movie Battle Royale. Thereby, conveying the reality of the site as verses the fictional imprints of collective thoughts of people through the work of fiction.

**Instance II French Pavilion: 'Metropolis' Venice Architecture Biennale 2010:**

Dominique Perault, the French architect was the curator of the French Pavilion. Exploring the theme of "Metropolis" he aimed to demonstrate metropolis as a territory of voids and masses, empty and available spaces rather than metropolis itself as a city. Consequently focusing on the voids in the metropolis and perceiving them as spaces where all possibilities can come true made itself a theme for the subject and pavilion design.

To further with his idea, he shortlisted the five major French scenes then, the metropolises of Bordeaux (Housing, Tidal Docks, Transportations), Lyon (Lyon Confluences and district of La Part Dieu), Marseille (Metropolis in motion, Parallel routes, Coastal scenery), and Nantes (Territory, Nantes Saint-Nazaire Estuary, Ile-de-Nantes, EuroNantes, the Ile-de-Nantes, planning du Grand Paris. These five shortlisted examples were then screened as projections and films, designed in
highly cinematographic way. The exhibition pavilion walls were acting as screens with these films being projected from floor to ceiling. The interplay of screens considerably increased image sensations supported by the relevant background noises of the metropolitan spaces. The result was immensely precise and sensory environment, making the viewer experience the full scope of metropolis as an idea, also engage with the presentation on a different imaginative level through the created setting which was a subjective individual experience for the audience.

Figure 1             Figure 2

Figure 3           Figure 4

It was the method used to narrate the event, and its effectiveness as a communication tool that made it interesting and engaging. By creating a setting in the micro environment the audience is placed in a subjective position to the situation. The event offered various audio visual information simultaneously in the form of pictures, collages and films of the urban setting along with statistical data, mapping, technical diagrams, soundscapes and discourse. This environment made the concept easy to absorb experientially and define one’s own experience of the ‘metropolis’.

Figure 1, 2, 3 and 4 show the technique used to present the narrative in the exhibition space. Floor to floor mirror was used to reflect the similar thread of visual information to viewer from different perspectives.

**Form, space and installations as narratives:**

Built forms are not accidents, they are the products of a need, understanding, choice, and perception and in previous times were more thoughtful arrangements of the culture and society's reflections directly or as a metaphor. Buildings have always been used to convey or portray different aspects of life beyond merely being habitable spaces through various styles of architecture. The world history clearly indicates the use of art and architecture to narrate a story about a particular time and place. Built form has a potential to act as a canvas for its story teller, the designer, to convey the desired through indoor and outdoor spaces, through textures, through colours, facades and the form itself. Spatial experience in recent times has been used to act as a narrative in addressing the crucial aspect of cities and architecture.
Instance III Netherlands Pavilion, Venice Architecture Biennale 2010:

The theme of the pavilion dealt with exhibiting the subject of the thousands of the buildings in Netherlands that have been unoccupied for several years. "Vacant NL" intended to narrate how the gargantuan number and diversity of temporarily available properties present a range of opportunities and possibilities, and how the temporary use of those buildings can prove to be positive idea for innovation within the creative knowledge economy. More interestingly, the building which hosted the exhibition was also one of the victims and has been empty for over 39 years since its inauguration in 1954. The exhibition curators, Rietveld Landscape, emphasised the concept of exhibition theme by leaving the floor plate of the first floor in the pavilion empty while the highlight was the suspended ceiling above made out of blue foam replicating a random grid pattern on the ceiling from below. From the first level of the pavilion and onwards, the suspended field revealed itself as a collection of models of churches, schools, water towers, factories, hangers, light houses and office blocks. Alongside, the drawings on the wall displayed the proposed possible connections made between vacant buildings and the creative professionals. The curators re-imagined the new spatial strategy at an urban scale narrating the possibility through their work.

Images show ceiling made up of empty building blocks as grid like pattern from below and the relevant drawings on the wall informing connections between the empty spaces and potential functions.

Ceiling from above revealing itself as dense urban cape composed of the uninhabited buildings.

The installation narrated ideas regarding the productive and efficient reuse of the empty building blocks and spaces in the urban setting. It used a very different narrative format in exhibiting the desired by playing with the presentation of urban scale in order to make the audience experience the concept.
From below the models as ceiling appeared to be grid filed depicting it as a ground study or the footprints. Whereas from above the set of model as buildings seemed to have a distinctive character an identity. The use of to scale models along with its clustered format and positioning expressed the great mass and number of the empty and the available buildings in the Netherlands. The narrative was strengthened by acknowledging the historical condition of the existing building having been itself empty for over 39 years.

**Conclusion:**

As humans, we have a natural tendency to relate to our experiences and try and find meanings of things around us either consciously or unconsciously. Our experiences are constructed on the cognitive interactions with internal and external senses and this is where films as narratives play an important role in perceiving architecture around us. Well designed films and spatial experiences as narratives have the ability to strike our emotions and locate us in the subjective mode where we as an individual decide what we thinks of the situation or the issue that is narrated via either of the medium. The shear ability of expressing spectrum of parameters at one time is what makes films an effective narrative technique.

The above explained, intersecting case studies between art, architecture and films suggest and provide an opportunity to take the architectural practice to a new and more refined level where things are seen and shown from an unexplored perspective. They challenge the discipline of architecture to critically revise and rethink the current notions of spatial design and re-establish the practice with more extensive network by collaborating and borrowing specialism.
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